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ABSTRACT

As it is difficult to know how much damage negative publicity can cause or how an organization should react to it, the best measures are seen as preventive. Advocacy or issue advertising, which attempts to tackle controversial subjects and present facts and arguments that will project the sponsor in a positive light, is one such measure which colleges and universities are beginning to employ. Five hundred new undergraduates and 1,000 students who had been accepted but not enrolled at Chico were surveyed about their attitudes toward California State University-Chico (CSUC). The institution had experienced bad publicity because of violence and a magazine story labeling CSUC the nation's number one "party" school. Eighty-two percent of respondents who attended CSUC had heard or seen a negative story about the university during the year preceding their arrival, while 75% who chose not to attend the university knew of negative stories. In addition, negative publicity had received attention from both prospective students and their friends. Nonetheless, the negative publicity appeared to have had little impact on students' college choice. Traditional college selection criteria (academic programs, social setting, etc.) remained important to students. Further research is warranted. (Three tables of data are included; 17 references are attached.) (SG)

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Negative Publicity: Its Effect on Institutional Reputation and Student College Choice

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Introduction

Many institutions realize that publicity can either enhance or harm their public image. These institutions often use public relations campaigns to enhance their image in the media. However, when negative publicity erupts without warning, it is often difficult to know how much damage the publicity caused or how to react to it (Pinsdorf, 1987). Articles and books have been written discussing ways in which negative publicity can be dealt with (Carter, 1987; Pinsdorf, 1987; Heath, 1988). According to Carter (1987), the best measures are seen as preventive. Advocacy or issue advertising is a type of preventative advertising. It attempts to tackle controversial issues and presents facts and arguments that will project the sponsor in a most positive light. For the institution, the two strengths of advocacy advertising are that both the content of the message and the environment of the ad can be controlled (Heath, 1988).

Colleges and universities have begun using similar strategies as part of new marketing methods to recruit students. Articles discussing how to improve advertising brochures and recruiting services or how to develop an actual marketing plan for a college or university are found in the literature (Discenza et al, 1985; Kotler, 1979; Fiske, 1979). Numerous studies have suggested different media may be more or less effective for controlling and sending different types of messages about the institution and its programs to prospective students (King, et al., 1986; Ingersoll & Klockentager, 1982; Litten & Groidigan, 1982).

In spite of the millions of dollars spent on efforts to spruce up the images of many educational institutions, studies indicate that students and parents remain concerned about traditional issues such as cost and financial aid availability, quality of academic programs, size of institution, geographic location, and prestige of institution when selecting a college (Sevier, 1987;

Rickard & Walters, 1984; Erdman, 1984). Studies also suggest that a student's college choice is influenced by the recommendations of their parents, high school counselors, and friends (Astin, 1984; Chapman, 1981). Several authors, however, have suggested that the key factor affecting student choice of a college is the reputation and prestige of the school (Kealy & Rockel, 1987; MacDermott et al., 1987; Rickard & Walters, 1984).

Occasionally, as with other institutions and corporations, colleges and universities receive negative publicity from various souces which can undo the strides made by energetic marketing and image making. Little research has been conducted on the effects of negative publicity on the image and reputation of a school and its effect on college choice by prospective students. It is also unclear how colleges and universities cope with negative publicity.

During the spring of 1987, California State University, Chico was inundated with negative publicity. The school was ranked the #1 party school in the nation by Playboy magazine in its January 1987 issue, a Chico State football player had been charged with the gruesome murder of an elderly local physician and his wife, and the university's annual Pioneer Days celebration in May was cancelled because of near rioting the night before Pioneer Days began. These incidents garnered extensive local and regional negative publicity for the university. In addition, the negative stories were carried by the national wire services and network television and published in many magazine and newspaper articles throughout the country. At the time of the Pioneer Days disturbances, Dr. Robin Wilson, president of CSUC, warned that the negative publicity of such events would cheapen the university's academic degrees and reduce enrollment (Toussaint, 1987).

Questions must be asked about the impact of extensive negative publicity occurring in a short period of time. What consequences does such negative

publicity have on a college? Does this negative publicity have an effect on college choice by prospective students? Do negative messages from the media and friends influence a student's college choice? Does negative publicity impact the university's reputation to such an extent that students ignore the traditional choice areas of academic program quality, financial cost, and geographic location? Does student perception of university components change after hearing negative publicity? Or is the old adage true: "There's no such thing as bad publicity"?

Three hypotheses were tested to answer the questions raised as a result of the negative publicity.

1. Students who chose not to attend CSUC perceived more negative messages from the media and friends than did students who chose to attend CSUC.

2. Students who chose to attend CSUC would cite traditional reasons for their college choice while students who chose not to attend CSUC would reveal that their reason for non-attendance was the negative reputation of the university.

3. Students who chose not to attend CSUC ranked university components significantly lower than students attending CSUC.

Methodology

New freshmen and junior transfer students who had been accepted at CSUC for fall semester 1987 were selected as the focus of this study. First, 250 freshmen and 250 junior transfer students attending CSUC were surveyed. Second, 500 freshmen and 500 junior transfer students admitted but not enrolled were surveyed. Twice as many surveys were sent to no-show students in anticipation of difficulty in reaching subjects who had been accepted but not

matriculated at CSUC. A sample of on-campus students from the two grade levels was randomly selected from the Admissions and Records data base after fall registration was completed. The sample of the no-show students was randomly selected from the Admissions and Records data base of those who had completed applications and been accepted but did not enroll.

Questionnaires were mailed to students on September 28, 1987. A return envelope was included with the one-page questionnaire. The response rates for on-campus students and no-show students were 25.2% and 21%, respectively. The somewhat low response rate follows typical response patterns for academic institutional research for student populations.

The survey utilized open-ended questions designed to elicit unbiased responses to questions regarding reasons for stories/information at CSUC and attendance/non-attendance at CSUC. For data analysis, only the response listed as "subject #1" for stories and "most important" for reasons were analyzed. A modified Likert question was used to allow the students to rate traditional university components from outstanding to average to poor.

For evaluation purposes, the on-campus group of freshmen and juniors is analyzed as one unit and the no-show group of freshman and juniors as a second unit.

The subject of the stories about the university the respondents heard via the media or from friends were initially listed as subject one and two by the respondents as they completed the questionnaire. For the purposes of this study, only those stories listed first were assigned to one of four categories. Little interpretation of these responses was necessary because the categories were all inclusive and the subjects' responses were quite specific. Category one was designated "negative" messages which included specific mentions of the Playboy magazine ranking of party schools, the Pioneer Day celebration

"riots", party school activities such as drinking, keg rolls and "partying until you drop." Category two included more positive or "traditional" messages such as excellence in recruiting by corporations, good academic programs or the beauty of the campus and community. Category three indicated that the subjects had not heard any stories from the media or friends and category four was for no responses. Frequency distributions and chi-square tests were run on this data.

Eight graduate students serving as coders reviewed and classified the responses to the questions pertaining to subjects' reasons for attendance or non-attendance. The responses were assigned to one of eight categories covering appropriate reasons or rationale for the subjects' decisions. Intercoder reliability (the agreement among the coders) was 75.4%. Frequency distributions were generated from this data.

The rankings of outstanding to neutral to poor for the university components by the two groups were assigned numerical values. Frequency distributions were run on these responses and a t-test was run on the two means for each component.

Results

Table 1 shows that 82% of the students attending CSUC had heard or seen a negative story about the university during the year preceding their arrival. Among the respondents who had been accepted to CSUC and chose not to attend, 75% had heard or seen a negative media story. Eleven percent of the on-campus respondents had not heard or seen any media coverage while 14% of the no-show respondents had not heard or seen a media story.

Table 1 also shows that 41% of the CSUC respondents had heard a negative story about the university from their friends while 49% of the no-show respondents had heard similar negative stories. Traditional stories about the university were heard by 44% of the on-campus students while 35% of the no-

show respondents heard such stories. Twelve percent of both the on-campus respondents and the no-show respondents had not heard any messages from friends.

Hypothesis 1 stated: Students who chose not to attend CSUC received more negative messages from the media and friends than did students who chose to attend CSUC. Based on the data, the hypothesis is rejected. Results of chi-square tests indicate there is no significant difference in the amount of messages received from media and friends between on-campus students and no-show students.

TABLE 1
Messages about CSUC Received from Media and Friends

	Freshmen & Juniors at CSUC n=123)				Freshmen & Juniors Not at CSUC (n=207)			
	Media		Friends		Media		Friends	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Negative Messages	101	82	51	41	156	75	102	49
Traditional Messages	7	6	54	44	13	6	72	35
Didn't Hear Any	13	11	15	12	29	14	24	12
No Response	2	2	3	2	9	4	9	4

Table 2 presents the reasons for attending or not attending California State University, Chico. Freshmen and juniors at CSUC indicated that atmosphere/location (43%) and academics (37%) were the main reasons for choosing to attend CSUC. No students indicated that the negative reputation of the campus attracted them to the university.

Freshmen and juniors no-shows indicated that attendance elsewhere (42%) and finances (25%) were the main reasons for non-attendance. Only 3% of no-show students indicated that the negative reputation of the university influenced their college choice.

Hypothesis 2 stated: Students who chose to attend CSUC would cite traditional reasons for their college choice while students who chose not to attend CSUC would reveal that their reason for non-attendance was the negative reputation of the university. Based on the data, the hypothesis was rejected. Frequencies indicate both on-campus and no-show students were influenced by traditional reasons in making their college selection. The negative reputation appears to have marginally influenced the students' college choice.

Table 3 shows a comparison of the means of the subjects' rankings of the traditional university components. Both groups ranked career recruiting, athletics, social setting, safety and beauty of the campus much the same. A small difference is seen in the subjects' ranking of the academic programs with the no-show students ranking them slightly lower than the on-campus students.

TABLE 2

Reasons for Attending or Not Attending
California State University, Chico

	Freshmen & Juniors at CSUC		Freshman & Juniors Not at CSUC	
	Why Attend (n=105)		Why Not Attend (n=175)	
	N	%	N	%
Academics	39	37	6	3
Finances	1	<1	46	25
Attendance Elsewhere	0	0	74	42
Location/ Atmosphere	46	43	18	13
Positive Reputation/ Prestige	7	7	11	6
Negative Reputation	0	0	6	3
Miscellaneous	11	10	25	14
No Response	0	0	2	1

Table 3
Rankings of Traditional University Components
Scale = 1 outstanding, 3 neutral, 5 poor

	Freshmen & Juniors at CSUC N = 123 mean	Freshmen & Juniors Not at CSUC N = 207 mean
Academic Programs	1.98	2.13
Career Recruiting	2.11	2.22
Athletic Program	2.71	2.69
Social Setting	1.82	1.81
Beauty of Area	1.38	1.60
Safety	2.26	2.32

Hypothesis 3 stated: Students who chose not to attend CSUC ranked university components significantly lower than students attending CSUC. Based on the data, hypothesis 3 was rejected. T-tests showed that the differences between the rankings of the university components by the two groups were not significant.

Conclusions

This study sought to examine the effects of negative publicity on an educational institution's reputation with regard to prospective students' college choice. The negative publicity which created national exposure for California

State University, Chico, was prompted by a series of events during spring semester 1987. While the incidents triggering the negative publicity were not life threatening, they were the type of activities that university administrators carefully avoid, particularly in an era of unpredictable college enrollment.

The study surveyed students who had enrolled at CSUC for fall semester 1987 and students who had accepted but not enrolled for fall semester 1987. Specifically, the study examined negative messages from media and friends, reasons for attendance and non-attendance, and rankings of university components. Based on data and statistical tests, all hypotheses were rejected. Little difference was found between the two groups of students.

It is interesting to note that 82 percent of students enrolled at CSUC and 75 percent of students who were admitted but not enrolled had themselves heard or read negative stories about CSUC. In addition, students enrolled at CSUC reported that 41 percent of their friends had told them negative messages about CSUC, and 49 percent of students not enrolled at CSUC had been told such negative stories by friends. This provides evidence that the negative publicity had received much attention from both prospective students and their friends. According to previous research, a student's college choice is influenced by recommendations of their parents and friends (Astin, 1984; Chapman, 1981). However, in spite of widespread concerns from college administrators and faculty about the negative publicity and its effects on fall enrollment , results of this study indicate that this type of publicity had little influence, at least for applicants and enrollees, on college choice for fall 1987. Coincidentally, that semester CSUC experienced its largest enrollment in the history of the campus.

The results of the study seem to indicate that the negative publicity did not appear to affect the university's reputation or components to such an extent

that prospective students ignored traditional reasons for choosing a college. Though the majority of students had both received negative media messages and had friends relate negative messages to them, the negative publicity does not appear to have influenced the students' college choices. It would appear that this study substantiates the idea that "there's no such thing as bad publicity."

Despite the reasons students revealed in this study, the study should be replicated to determine if the students surveyed were attempting to compensate for unrevealed concerns about the reputation of the university. Further research may determine if this type of negative publicity was simply an acceptable abberation in the long-standing positive reputation of the university. Additional research may also determine if the extensive regional and national exposure was worth the negative short-term publicity.

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